

**POLICY & ADVOCACY SESSION**

# Parent-child relationships in the digital era

**MONDAY 22ND NOVEMBER  
14.00-16.15 CET**

**KEY FINDINGS**



# Policy & Advocacy session on Parent Child Relationships in the Digital Era

**Key reflections and recommendations**

February 2022

## **Overarching messages from the session**

- Raising the digital generation can be a challenge. Families must receive adequate guidance and support in navigating parenting in the digital era.
- Digitalisation affects the whole family in different ways. Each family member has different levels of digital competences and uses for digital technologies, with children and young people often acting as 'experts' in this area. Families should be empowered to work together to develop digital competences and co-develop strategies to mediate their use of digital technologies.
- It is clear that although there are important interventions families can make themselves, they cannot tackle this alone. Policy makers and technology companies must play their part and not leave the burden on children and families.

# Background

The parent-child relationship has changed significantly in the last two decades with the advent of the digital age. The general perception is that technology has caused a deterioration of family relations, but fresh evidence from European research shows that the picture is more nuanced. A recently published DigiGen report indicates that the ways families engage with digital technologies are complex and have varying effects. On the one hand, ICT offers unique opportunities for all family members. On the other hand, children – and adults – face online risks and challenges. It shows that the ways families engage with digital technologies are complex.

# Aims

The aims of the COFACE policy and advocacy session held on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2021 were the following:

- Consult a wide range of stakeholders on ICT and the impact on family life about key measures needed to support parent-child relationships in the digital era;
- Encourage knowledge transfer across EU countries on the impact of digitalisation on family life;
- Present results of the DigiGen Horizon2020 research on the impact of digital transformations and families;
- Promote lifelong learning, to keep up with the rapid changes that digital technology is bringing to the world;
- Ensure child rights are respected in the online world, with a focus on building a safer internet and online participation.

# Programme

**Moderators** Elizabeth Gosme, Director of COFACE Families Europe and Holly Shorey, Project and Advocacy Officer COFACE Families Europe

**14:00-14:10 Welcome by COFACE and aims of the session**

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE Families Europe

**14:10-14:30 Better Internet for Kids- Youth voices on parent-child relationships in the digital era**

Yevgeny (Malta), Mia (Ireland), and Billie (Ireland)

**14:30-15:15 Evidence from DigiGen research on the use of digital technologies within families and the impact on daily family life**

Olaf Kapella, Senior Researcher and Research Coordinator, Austrian Institute for Family Studies at the University of Vienna, Austria

Merike Sisask, Professor of Social Health Care, University of Tallinn, Estonia

**15:15- 16:00 Reactions and recommendations from key stakeholders**

Key guiding questions:

- What are the key challenges and opportunities for families and children in the digital era?
- What measures are needed to support parent-child relationships in the digital era?

**16:00-16:15 Conclusions and recommendations**

Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE Families Europe

# Welcome and context

*Annemie Drieskens*  
*COFACE Families Europe President*

A year ago, COFACE Families Europe adopted its Child Compass 2030: For a Europe which invests in shaping a healthy society, environment, and economy fit for children. The child is not an individual under parental control but a member of an extended family, neighbourhood, community or society with their own input. This compass is our guide and helps us to develop 21st-century policies and put children and their families first, also in the digital world. We are previously analog families attempting to cope with the digital era. As parents, there is a lot to gain by slowing down at the right moment and unplug ourselves and switch off mobile phones to recharge our brains. Childhood has moved increasingly online and with the advent of the electronic playground the parent-child relationship has changed significantly.

The International day of children rights on the 20<sup>th</sup> November is an excellent moment for a vibrant conversation about this parent child relationship in the digital era. Parents have always had to face challenges. Yet the advent of digital and mobile media makes them wonder: **How to parent in the digital age?** Parents indicate they sometimes feel lost and that they are worried about the effect of constant stimulation by visual and audio entertainments and the immersion of children in the bath of digital amusement. Family is a key learning environment; most parents are actively seeking to avoid being helicopter parents, hovering over their children shoulders and seeking to discover potential dangers. Intensive parenting instead of seeking opportunities for their children to use digital and mobile media to experience

**“SOCIAL MEDIA CAN GROUP US  
TOGETHER AND MAKE US MORE  
POWERFUL TOGETHER”**

**YEVGENY (15 years)**

independence and even to make mistakes and experience consequences. It is important to have a conversation and really listen to interests and concerns of parents and children.

We are delighted to welcome speakers from the Horizon 2020 research project DigiGen. They will bring fresh insights about what is going on with families in this digital age and how digital media are reshaping the parent and child relationship. We are also delighted to have Better Internet for Kids Youth ambassadors with us today to bring in the voice of the ‘Digital Generation’. Together with key stakeholders: COFACE members, researchers, policy-makers, NGOs, children, families, we want to address the concerns about technological transformation that lie in all of our hearts and find out **“What do we want the digital future to look like for parents and children in Europe?”**

## Key reflections from BIK Youth

All BIK Youth ambassadors noted the importance of not demonising the internet or digital technologies, especially since it is what facilitates this discussion. Both positive and negative impacts of digital technologies on parent-child relationships must be considered.

## Positive aspects

- Digital technologies allow families to stay in touch regardless of whether they live in the same country, especially useful during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Families are able to develop shared interests and spend time together e.g. through streaming films or television, playing games, laughing at the same memes.
- Social media allows children and young people to find their tribe which makes them feel more understood and supported, thereby increasing the wellbeing of the broader family.

## Negative aspects

- Children and young people may struggle to communicate problems they are having online with family members/teachers due to fears of judgement, misunderstanding, or potential repercussions.
- Conflict between children and parents may arise in regard to how much time is spent on digital technologies and how the child interacts online e.g. whether they have a public or private profile, what they share on social media.
- Children and young people as the 'Digital Generation' have grown up with this technology unlike their parents and family members. This may impact the way parents cope with supporting children's use of digital technologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Jurczyk, K. (2014). Familie als Herstellungsleistung. Hintergründe und Konturen einer neuen Perspektive auf Familie. In K. Jurczyk, A. Lange & B. Thiessen (eds.). *Doing Family: Warum Familienleben heute nicht mehr selbstverständlich ist*. 1. Aufl

# Evidence from DigiGen research

*Evidence from DigiGen research on the use of digital technologies within families and the impact on daily family life- Olaf Kapella (University of Vienna) & Merike Sisask (University of Tallinn).*

Olaf Kapella and Merike Sisask presented the latest data on the impact and use of digital technologies on family life from the DigiGen research project. This research employs the theoretical concept of 'doing family' as a lens to examine how family is produced and exhibited through common practices.<sup>1</sup> For example, digital technologies (DT) help to maintain and create a feeling 'we-ness' and family identity. Digital technologies also contribute to 'doing family' through managing daily family responsibilities including chores, communication, and care.

Families can be reduced into three broad categories concerning the extent to which digital technologies are integrated into their daily lives. There are **heavy users** of DT who often own a lot of different digital devices and express positive feelings towards DT as a whole. Others take a more **neutral and relaxed way of using DT** than the heavy users. In this case, DT is not a seemingly glorified central element of family life, but more as the 'status quo'. It is there, and it is useful in daily life, but they do not feel particularly attached or impressed by its presence. On the other end of the spectrum are families who are **anxious, insecure, frustrated and highly skeptical about DT**.

(pp. 50-70). Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, Jurczyk, K. (2020, Ed.). *Doing und Undoing Family. Konzeptionelle und empirische Entwicklungen*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.

Instead of glorifying DT like the heavy users, these families avoid DT and perhaps even demonise its use.

There are also divergences between how different families mediate their children's DT use using rules:

- Families with clear and strict rules
- Families with medium rules and/or with unenforced rules
- Families with no rules or not as strict rules
- Families with vague and rather unpredictable rules

Rules may take the form of limiting screen time for a certain amount of time per day, banning from certain locations e.g. dinner table, or be restricted to certain uses e.g. educational games allowed but social media not for instance. There is a common consensus between children and parents that rules are a useful mediation tool. In most families, it appears that parents (or one parent) are the ones who create the rules. **It is advised that children should be involved in co-creating rules as active agents.**

The rules in place can cause tensions in the parent-child relationship. This was observed more commonly for older children 8-10, rather than the 5-6 year olds. Families implement varying strategies for preventing conflicts:

- Making rules clear before starting to use a digital device
- Extra time for finishing ongoing activities e.g. finishing the game before pausing
- Part of a family routine e.g. smartphones only used after lunch
- Physical interventions e.g. taking the device away or hiding it
- Re-directing attention or action from DT to somewhere else
- No intervention at all

Families witness beneficial and harmful effects of DT on family life. Beneficial effects revolved around practical advantages such as being able to order the weekly food shop online, leisure advantages such as gaming together, and being able to maintain family relations across households or even countries. In contrast, DT was also perceived to initiate conflicts in the family, and take up time which could have been spent on other more positively assessed activities such as going on a hike together.

For further insights, recommendations, and quotations from children and families, the full study can be accessed [here](#).

## Reflections from stakeholders & recommendations

The policy and advocacy session was attended by 70 participants from a variety of backgrounds (children, parents, family professionals, teachers, ICT industry, researchers, national and EU policy-makers and more) from 29 countries. A couple of key topics were discussed with key messages and recommendations emerging.

### Co-creation of rules

There was a clear emphasis on the need for children to be involved in creating rules concerning digital technology use. Billie from BIK Youth noted that "children need to be able to understand their boundaries, but also express their feelings towards boundaries that they're being put under when it comes to social media". In co-creating rules, the age and maturity of the child must be considered. Olaf Kapella, University of Vienna, reinforced that younger children will have different abilities to negotiate and create rules compared to older children. The extent to which children co-create rules will depend on the child. There may be cultural differences

in how rules are used and created across countries. Co-creation of rules could also prove useful in mediating confusion and distress in constructing and understanding rules. Maria Roth, Babes-Bolyai University, commented “As for the anxiety of children, I am not sure that it is due to technology. It seems to me, based on listening to children, that it is related also to the conflicts between parents and children. Worries of children materialising in inconsistent rules, creates anxiety to children.”

**Recommendation: Children should be engaged in creating rules concerning their digital technology use, according to the age and maturity of the child.**

**Guidance and support for families in seizing opportunities and mitigating risks of the digital era**

One common reflection was that parents and children lack guidance on how to navigate the risks and opportunities of the digital era. This support would allow both groups to develop stronger parent-child relationships online. Merike Sisask, University of Tallinn, made clear that children need socialisation into digital technology use in the same way that they need support in the general socialisation process. This can be a big feat for parents as they are not from the Digital Generation. In other areas of parenting, parents may look to their own childhood experiences, or to inter-generational support through strategies passed down from their elders. This does not exist for coping with digitalisation, which may make parents feel lost.

The traditional perception that parents have the knowledge and experience to diffuse to their children is more complicated when it comes to the digital era. In many aspects of digitalisation, children may have greater competences than their parents. This can lead to parents feeling insecure in their

abilities to support and mediate their children’s ICT use. Adequate, tailored support must be provided to overcome this.

“PARENTS NEED TO BE OPEN TO THEIR CHILDREN’S NEEDS, INTERESTS AND ALSO WISHES AND THERE IS A NEED TO INVOLVE CHILDREN IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING RULES IN THE FAMILY”

MERIKE SISASK

**Reversed learning**

Due to children’s place in the Digital Generation, they may find themselves offering support to older family members in seizing the opportunities of digital technologies. This was brought into the discussion as ‘reversed learning’. There are several positive and negative aspects of reversed learning to acknowledge.

Positive aspects of reversed learning:

- Sharing knowledge and using digital technologies together may allow family members to break down generational divides and come together as a family.

Negative aspects:

- This reversed learning approach may be difficult depending on the family dynamics, it may cause more conflicts.
- The burden should not be put on children to provide this support. Stakeholders remarked that children, especially in more deprived families, already take on many roles in regards to digital technology use in the family. For example, communicating and getting important information, buying what is needed from the internet.
- Children have their own vulnerabilities and the benefits of reversed learning should not lose sight of the risks and gaps in their own knowledge.

**Recommendation: Children and young people, as the Digital Generation, may play a role as experts to support their family members' use of digital technologies. Peer-to-peer education and reversed learning are useful tools, but the burden should not be placed on the child. Children have their own agency but also their own vulnerabilities to be considered at all stages of developing guidance.**

### **Influence of platform design**

Although there is a clear need for greater support for parents and children to navigate the risks and opportunities of the digital era, platform design can distort the ability for individuals to mediate their use of digital technologies. For example, certain platforms are designed to keep people online as long as possible, no matter whether this is good for them or causes conflicts with family life. This adds complexity to parent-child relationships since both parties are attempting to self-regulate their ICT usage against the power of platform design. Support should not put the burden on families to control their use of digital technologies.

**Recommendation: There must be shared responsibility between regulation (including of technology companies), self-regulation, and education.**

### **Perception of risks- risks as reality, risks as rumours**

The way in which risks of digital technologies such as health, wellbeing, and security issues are portrayed can influence how families support and mediate their digital

technology use. Olaf Kapella, University of Vienna, highlighted how the opportunities of digital technologies are often experienced, whilst the risks are often only heard about. He states that "These risks are just kind of rumours which have been spread between peers, among parents". This can reinforce moral panic with fears of children becoming aggressive with video games or addicted to social media. The participants made clear that this does not mean that there are not real and dangerous risks associated with digital technologies. It simply means that the greater weight is given to 'risks as rumours' with little attention given to the 'risks as reality'. The louder these 'risks as rumours' are, the greater influence they have over family dynamics and potential conflicts.

**Recommendation: Guidance and education for families should focus on highlighting both the opportunities of digital technologies and the evidenced risks.**

## **Conclusions**

*Holly Shorey COFACE Project and Advocacy Officer*

Parent-child relationships can and always will have complexities which we will have to adopt support systems and strategies to cope with. The parenting approaches that we take to 'offline' challenges may be based on what our own families taught us as children, or sometimes intentionally the opposite. In the digital era, parents do not have as much to fall back on. This is not necessarily helped by the incessant scaremongering and moral panic of the dangers of technologies. The discourse is full of 'screentime addiction', 'don't talk to strangers', and 'you'll ruin your eyesight'. As this session highlights, the more attention these 'risks as rumours' get, the less attention we pay to the very real risks and opportunities that digital technologies



bring. This misleading focus in the common discourse fails families, since they do not get the targeted support that they need to confidently navigate parenting in the digital age. **Families must be guided by strong evidence based support.**

Although parent-child relationships may endure new and different strains in the digital era, there are also opportunities to foster stronger, more resilient family relations. Children and young people as the Digital Generation have strengths and expertise as digital natives. In many families, children take on roles of supporting older families use and competence of digital technologies. This may turn some traditional family roles on their head by sidelining previous 'children must be seen and not heard' approaches and reimagining the expertise that different family members have. Part of this transition includes valuing children's ability to co-create rules that mediate their use of digital technologies. It is clear from the DigiGen research and from BIK Youth's insights that including children in decision making reduces conflicts and promotes stronger family unity. **Technological transformation does not only affect the digital generation, the whole family should be included in developing digital competences and mediating use of digital technologies.**

These interventions are one part of the equation in supporting strong parent-child relationships in the digital era. No matter how well supported they are and how well they integrate positive mediation strategies into their daily lives, they will struggle against the power of technology companies. **Policy makers and technology companies must play their part in creating and regulating digital technologies that work for families.**

## Resources

- [Skills4Parents Guide](#)
- [COFACE 2030 Child Compass](#)
- DigiGen working paper examining the influence of technological transformation on family life by Olaf Kapella and Merike Sisask (ed.) is available [here](#).
- [BIK Youth](#)
- [Digital Generation blog article by BIK Youth Ambassador Yevgeny reflecting on the Policy and Advocacy session](#)
- [Media statement for SID 22](#)

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